



By: Sean Wiswesser

Is Putin participating in the US elections?



The Russians don't need to change a single vote to "win" an election. They need enough Americans, Brits, Germans, or other Europeans to believe their elections are rigged, their political opponents are enemies, and their democracies are hopelessly corrupt.

That is a strong enough victory for Russian intelligence. And increasingly, it is precisely the kind of victory Vladimir Putin is seeking.

The Russian intelligence services take the lead in this **war against our democracy**. They believe it is a win if democracies are divided, weak, and unable to counter Putin's war in Ukraine.

They believe we are not equipped to counter them in the gray zone, nor in the cyber world of shadow war.

This is all Putin's Secret War; it has been fought from their side for decades, but has not received enough attention in the U.S. and Europe. They want, above all else, to attack our elections and the ballot box via our minds.

As we approach America's November midterm elections, fresh revelations of **Russian election interference** across the United States and Europe should concern us all.

But these are not isolated incidents, nor are they merely attempts to elect politicians sympathetic to Moscow.

They are part of a century-old Russian intelligence playbook, refined by the KGB, inherited by its successors, and now supercharged by artificial intelligence: Russian active measures and information warfare.

The objective is much greater than helping any one candidate or political party. It is to undermine democracy itself.

The Russian intelligence services – the FSB, SVR, and GRU – aim to sow discord, disunity, and division.

Turn citizens against their governments, political groups against one another, and

democratic societies against themselves.

If we appear weak, divided, and incapable of governing ourselves, authoritarian regimes like Putin's Russia appear strong by comparison.

And a weakened West is less capable of confronting Russian aggression in Ukraine, the Baltics, or wherever Putin next chooses to strike.

China and Iran are hardly innocent bystanders – both conduct influence operations of their own. But consider just some of the evidence of Russia's activities in recent months as a playbook of what to expect from all our autocratic adversaries.

Same dirty tricks, new technology

On October 21, senior **American lawmakers** disclosed that a classified U.S. intelligence briefing identified Russian disinformation efforts targeting Democratic candidates ahead of November's congressional elections.

According to Reuters, the operations reportedly included fabricated political advertisements employing artificial intelligence and disinformation targeting candidates in several states.

And earlier this month, **social-media platform X** announced the suspension of more than 13,000 accounts associated with suspected influence operations from Russia, China, and Iran.

The networks reportedly targeted candidates and public figures across the American political spectrum, although X did not disclose Russia's individual share.

None of this should surprise us. Russian intelligence exploited America's most divisive issues in 2016 and 2020 – race, immigration, abortion, and political extremism.

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Not because Moscow necessarily cared about the merits of those debates; the Russian intelligence services lack any sentimentality, and any morality, for that matter.

But they attack the issues most emotional to our populations in the U.S. and Europe because they seek to turn us against one another.

Russian services have no sentimentality about our political causes. Despite claims to the contrary from a wide spectrum of politicians, Russian intelligence has no permanent allegiance to any Western political parties or politicians.

Its support is transactional, dictated by Moscow's interests. Today's favored candidate may become tomorrow's expendable asset.

The Russians are loyal to only one person, who has no real political party: Vladimir Putin.

They use the rest of us in the West to their advantage. The issues themselves are incidental; the politicians they use are temporary. Division is the objective. Putin's interests – and the Kremlin's strategic objectives – come first.

Russian intelligence's fingerprints

In September, the [Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#) documented over 260 posts over just 21 days by the Kremlin-aligned Matryoshka, also known as the Operation Overload network, targeting Germany's regional elections.

Fabricated allegations attacked politicians across multiple political parties. Again, the evidence shows attacks on democracy more fundamentally than any one candidate or

party.

Earlier this year, [German authorities](#) also formally attributed the Storm-1516 operation, which targeted the country's 2025 federal election, to a Russian campaign backed by the GRU, Russia's military intelligence service.

This shouldn't be surprising, but the escalation and amplification by AI is.

Fake news websites, fabricated investigations, deepfake videos, and fictitious witnesses were all part of the arsenal used by the Russian services this year.

In France, as soon as social unrest started, there were hundreds of stories in multiple languages put out all over the internet claiming – falsely – that French Muslim groups caused the unrest.

[Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, the SVR, publicly alleged just days before that election that NATO and the European Union were preparing to occupy Moldova](#)

None of the major protest groups really claimed or believed that, but it is Russian active measures at their finest, seeking to amplify discord, sow even more confusion, and spur violence, if they can.

In Moldova, meanwhile, a [G7 investigation](#) documented extensive Russian information manipulation at play during the country's September 2025 parliamentary elections.

Russian state-aligned operations accounted for 91 percent of identified foreign manipulation content during the initial monitoring period.

Perhaps most tellingly, Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, the SVR, publicly alleged just days before that election that NATO and the European Union were preparing to occupy Moldova. An absurd allegation.

But one designed to frighten voters, discredit Western institutions, and muddy the political waters. They didn't even try to hide that one.

All this evidence establishes Russian intelligence efforts to manipulate the information environment and to create confusion over whether democracy can be trusted. It is a universal theme of their attacks and approach.

Understanding the Russian intelligence playbook

As I argue in my book, *Tradecraft, Tactics, and Dirty Tricks: Russian Intelligence and Putin's Secret War*, these operations are classic Russian active measures—what their intelligence services now call measures of support (the SVR renamed its “Active Measures” directorate years ago, in another effort to hide their engagement in it) – a new name, but still thousands of officers dedicated to non-stop information warfare.

The KGB's operational doctrine, documented by the famous archivist-turned-defector Vasily Mitrokhin (in his series of books with Dr. Christopher Andrew of Cambridge), described active measures as operations intended to influence political life, mislead adversaries, weaken their positions, and disrupt their plans. Sound familiar?

Three elements define these operations: identify the target, select the operational method, and, most importantly, apply maskirovka – denial and deception – to hide Russia's hand.

That is maskirovka – make it look as though someone, anyone, else is responsible

The methods range from bribing journalists, establishing fake front organizations, or possibly recruiting agents of influence – who might work in NGOs, academia, or other similar spaces – what Lenin famously called

“useful idiots.”

Recall earlier this year the Russian-directed provocations targeting religious and ethnic communities in Europe – including pigs' heads placed outside mosques and the desecration of Jewish sites. The purpose was to inflame populations, encourage competing accusations, and generate what some have called cognitive strikes against Western societies.

It is an old tactic. Make the French hate each other. The Germans distrust one another. Americans believe their fellow citizens are enemies. And above all, conceal Moscow's involvement.

That is maskirovka – make it look as though someone, anyone, else is responsible.

An old weapon now transformed

The Soviets and Russians have been conducting such operations for more than a century. What once required recruited agents, forged newspaper stories, clandestine funding, and painstaking operational preparation can now be accomplished on a vastly greater scale with cognitive AI.

Fabricated videos, cloned voices, fictitious personalities, and seemingly authentic news reports can be produced and distributed at extraordinary speed.

What once required teams of human operators, considerable resources, and months of preparation can now be produced in minutes and distributed on an unprecedented scale.

AI has transformed the speed, volume, and potential reach of its operations.

Russian intelligence used mostly human-enabled operations in 2016 through groups like the infamous “Fancy Bear” and other hackers from the SVR, GRU, and FSB.

Russian operatives were given quotas for how many posts they needed to do on social media, usually 200 a day for some Russian trolls, minimum. Today, AI bots can do tens of thousands or more in hours.

AI has not changed Moscow's strategic objectives. But the strategic objective remains unchanged.



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Putin's Russia cannot afford the example of successful, prosperous democracies on its borders.

Ukraine's determination to chart its own democratic future threatens the Kremlin's authoritarian narrative.

So do the Baltic states, whose independence and democratic development offer an alternative to Moscow's political model.

Democracy itself is the ideological threat. And Russian intelligence's political masters know that a divided NATO, a fractured European Union, and an America consumed by internal hostility and sparring with Europe will find it harder to challenge Russian aggression.

Education on the threat is important. But exposure alone is insufficient if U.S. and European citizens, and political leaders, continue amplifying the very divisions the Russians manufacture.

We need to stop being played by our Russian (and Chinese, and Iranian) adversaries. We must understand that these attacks are

neither temporary nor improvised.

They are systemic, deeply rooted in Russian intelligence doctrine, and likely to intensify as the Kremlin feels increasingly isolated.

There has been much talk this summer over whether Russia will "attack Europe." They have already attacked Ukraine and are trying to conquer that democracy by force. We should not rule out Putin using aggression again in the Baltics or elsewhere in Europe.

But Russia does not need to defeat NATO's armies in the field if it can first convince our societies to defeat themselves. And Putin doesn't need to win our elections. He just needs us to lose faith in them.

That is the real target of Russian active measures. Not one candidate. Not one political party, but our democracy, our institutions, and our trust in one another.

Russian intelligence has spent generations trying to make useful idiots of us all. We should stop helping them.

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